

QuickTakes



Your Work-Life Balance

Technological gadgetry has alleviated and introduced a lot of challenges in our lives. We can now find someone in a crowd with a quick text message, but we also interrupt conversations with real-life people to answer our mobile phones. We need a new standard of etiquette to teach our kids how to behave. Simply because you can doesn't mean you should.

– from The Power of Slow: 101 Ways to Save Time in our 24/7 World (St. Martin's Press, 2009) by Christine Louise Hohlbaum

These days, the boundary between work and home life is disappearing. With so many ways to stay connected, many of us have the ability to – and often feel obliged to – work at any time of the day or night. Reaching a healthy balance between your work life and your personal life in this 24/7 environment is a challenge. But it can be done.

Here's how:

- Recognize the importance of downtime
- Unplug and unwind
- Find balance when making dinner

The Benefits of Downtime

Are you juggling too many tasks and responsibilities? Do you feel the pressure to constantly stay in touch with colleagues even after normal work hours? Are you a master at multi-tasking? Do you feel like you never really leave work?

If this sounds like you, you may need some downtime. Scientists at the University of California, San Francisco, are studying the function of downtime in learning. They observed that when rats have a new experience, like exploring an unfamiliar area, their brains show new patterns of activity. But this only happens after the rats take a break from their exploring, so they create a real memory of the experience. The researchers suspect that the findings also apply to how humans learn.

“Almost certainly, downtime lets the brain go over experiences it's had, solidifying them and turning them into permanent long-term memories,” said Loren Frank, assistant professor of physiology at the university, and a specialist in learning and memory. He believes that when the brain is constantly stimulated, “you prevent this learning process.”

Unplug, turn off, and tune out – at least for awhile.

Try to set some boundaries with electronic devices in your household to really enjoy your leisure time. Keep your laptop off the dinner table. Leave your smart phone in your briefcase. If possible, let co-workers and friends know that there are times when you are not available.

Stake out some private time.

At preschools, they call it naptime. But adults need private time, too. Balance your family, social and work demands by reserving time for yourself. Find ways to create downtime and manage stress, such as taking a hot bath, reading a book or magazine, or listening to your favorite music.

For stress relief, participate in a physical activity.

Many of us unwind by playing video games, checking Facebook, shopping online or watching television. But if you're working at a computer all day long, you don't need more screen time. A brisk walk can reduce the level of stress hormones in your blood. Start slowly, and shoot for at least 30 minutes a day (or two 15-minute sessions); even three walks a week will do you good.

Finding Balance in Your Kitchen

After a stressful day at the office, it's tempting to pick up the phone and order a pizza, or pull a ready-made meal out of the freezer to heat up in the microwave. But when you can, try to make preparing a meal part of your transition from the office to your home life.

"Scientifically, the act of cooking can trigger beneficial physiological responses in the body," explains Dr. Bruce Rabin, medical director of the Healthy Lifestyle Program at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. He has observed that certain aromas or the repetition and rhythm of chopping have a calming effect much like meditation. Cooking also "reduces the concentration of hormones that go up with stress."

It's easier to enjoy the calming benefits of cooking if you've planned ahead. Whether you are cooking for yourself, for two or for a whole family, a little strategizing early on will pay out healthy, delicious rewards throughout the week.

Consider these tips for preparing meals that are part of your healthy, balanced lifestyle:

- **Plan a week's worth of dinners.** Dedicate a bit of weekend time to sketch out the week's dinners in advance. For inspiration, keep a notebook of your favorite easy recipes.
- **Shop smart.** Shop with your grocery list in hand and stick to it. This will reduce the number of return trips to the supermarket for forgotten ingredients.
- **Rely on your freezer.** Stash the makings of quick-and-easy meals in your freezer. Buy boneless chicken or turkey breasts in bulk. Once you're home, cut up the meat into individual portions and freeze in lock-tight freezer bags. They defrost quickly and you can use just as much as you need. Buy vegetables frozen loose in bags. Frozen peas, collards, spinach, beans, peppers and corn are all good on their own or for adding to pasta or rice dishes.
- **Depend on quick-cooking grains.** We all know that we're supposed to be eating whole grains, but you won't always have the time to cook brown rice from scratch. Instant-cooking brown rice is one option. Whole-wheat couscous and bulgur are another: they're ready after only a few minutes of steeping in simmering broth or water.
- **Hungry for pizza?** Keep a prebaked crust (or two) in your freezer. Spread with a low-sodium tomato sauce and load it up with pepper strips, sliced sweet onions, chopped olives and leftover grilled vegetables or chicken strips. Top with a prudent amount of part-skim mozzarella and a sprinkling of grated Parmesan.

Sweet Potato Minestrone Makes 8 Servings

Here's a soup to warm your heart even on the coldest nights. Use this recipe as a guideline, and make up your own version according to what you have on hand. If there's a red pepper in the fridge, feel free to add it along with the onion. Making soup from scratch may take a little more time than heating a ready-made product, but this recipe is wonderfully easy.

INGREDIENTS

1 teaspoon olive oil
8 oz low-fat smoked turkey sausage, sliced
1 onion, chopped (about 1 cup)
2 carrots, peeled and diced (about 1 cup)
1 celery rib, thinly sliced
3 cups low-sodium chicken broth or water
2 sweet potatoes, peeled and diced
3 1/2 cups (28 ounces)
no-salt-added chopped tomatoes
One 15-ounce can Great Northern
or cannellini beans, rinsed
2 teaspoons dried oregano
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
One 6-ounce bag baby spinach

NUTRITIONAL INFO PER SERVING

200 Calories
4g Fat
1g Saturated fat
0g Trans Fat
12g Protein
30g Carbohydrate
6g Fiber
550mg Sodium

DIRECTIONS

- 1) Heat the olive oil in a soup pot over medium heat. Add the sausage slices and cook until lightly browned. Add the onion, carrots and celery. Cook until soft, about 5 minutes.
- 2) Add broth or water, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, beans, oregano, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil then reduce heat and simmer, partially covered, for 30 minutes.
- 3) Stir in spinach and cook until wilted, about 2 minutes.

